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ABSTRACT

A study investigated (1) the everyday lives of Latino immigrant students at a large urban high school in the Southwest and (2) the educational program in place for this population. Subjects were 70 Latino students designated as limited-English-proficient (LEP) and placed in the freshman core English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program in their freshman year. Most had been in the United States for less than 2 years. The students were followed from their freshman year through the end of their high school experience, with data collected through observation on and off campus, formal and informal interviews with students and staff, and case studies of six of the students. Findings are presented concerning the students' language choice and ethnic identity, the presence of unofficial ESL "tracking" at the school, student perceptions of mainstreaming, characteristics and training of the school staff, students' legal status, and graduation rate. Excerpts from student statements are included. Some conclusions are drawn concerning peer relationships, language choice, student placement, the school's priorities for this group, and the effect of students' legal status on their schooling and retention. Several recommendations are made concerning ESL programs, concerning students' legal status, and further research. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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"DREAMS I WANTED TO BE REALITY:"
EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
AT AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Presented at AERA 1999 in Montreal, Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of English learners (students whose first language is not English) in the public schools has risen dramatically in recent times. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, there was an estimated increase of 83% in the number of school-age children in the U.S. who were not native speakers of English (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). This growth has given rise to new research and instructional programs to better understand and meet the educational needs of these students. Research in the area of bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) has focused primarily on the elementary grades, the age range with the largest population of English learners (Lucas, 1993). Middle and secondary schools, however, have also experienced a significant increase in the enrollment of non-English speaking youth (Minnicucci & Olsen, 1992). In a review of the current status of educating English learners at the secondary level, Faltis and Arias (1993) cited a desperate need for more research to better meet the needs of this population.

The great majority (79%) of immigrants to the U.S. between 1980 and 1990 came from Spanish-speaking countries (Wagonner, 1993). Latinos, both American-born and immigrant, have not fared as well in education as other ethnic groups in this country. The most recent data shows a high school graduation rate for Latinos of 63%, compared with 88% for Anglos and African Americans (Waggoner, 1999). In 1990, only one in eleven Latinos had obtained a bachelors degree or higher (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993).

Data from the 1990 U.S. census showed graduation rates of 70% for Latinos, 90% for Anglos, and 82% for African Americans (U.S. GAO Report, 1994). When the Latino graduation rate was disaggregated by place of birth, the graduation rate for U.S. born Latinos was foundto be 80%, compared with a graduation rate of 57% for non-U.S. born Latinos. Clearly, the educational needs of Latino immigrants, in particular, are not current.y being met by our public school sytem.

Although Latino immigrants are attending our high schools in unprecedented numbers, few studies have investigated the social world that these Latino immigrant students enter and create. Greater insight is needed to better understand the social aspects of the academic experiences of adolescent Latino immigrants in our public schools. Such information could be of significant benefit to those who make decisions concerning policy, curriculum, and instruction at the schools and districts where these students attend.

The purpose this research was two-fold. The first objective was to gain insights into the everyday lives of Latino immigrants at a large, urban high school. The second objective was to investigate the educational program that was in place for these English learners. The research methods employed were chosen with the intent of examining, to as great an extent as was possible, the students' experiences from their own perspectives. The focus of this study was a cohort of 70 Latino immigrants at a U.S. high school from the time they entered the school as freshmen until they graduated or otherwise ceased to attend.

METHODS

Setting

The site selected for this study was a large, urban high school in the Southwest. The school is located in a section of the city where the majority of the population had been African American, but in more recent times the Latino population had grown at a rate of 2.3% each year and had become the ethnic group most strongly represented. The socio-economic status of the residents of this area varied, but the average family income was lower than that of the city as a whole and contained several neighborhoods that were quite poor. The attendance area for the high school had the largest minority population, the highest percentage of households headed by females, and the highest rate of unemployment in the county.

At the time that the data were collected, the high school student population was over 3000. Approximately 55% of the students were Latino, 27% were African American, and 16% were Anglo. The remaining were American Indians and Asians. Of the teaching staff, 74% were Anglo, 13% were African American, and 11% were Latino. The entire high school district was experiencing phenomenal growth in its population of English learners. In the five years prior to the study, this population had increased 600%. The district was struggling to provide adequate staffing, materials, and a coherent program of instruction for its English learners. When the study began, the number of students designated as ESL at the high school was approximately 200, about six percent of the total student population.

The ESL Program

In the fall of 1990, a new program was implemented at the high school in an attempt to better meet the needs of incoming students with limited English skills. It was called the freshman ESL Core. Five teachers and one aide taught the core classes, which were: English as a second language, ESL reading, ESL math, ESL science, and Spanish for native speakers. (At this school "ESL" was used to refer to classes specifically designated for English learners, no matter what the subject). Students were also enrolled in one elective class such as physical education, key boarding, home economics, art, or study hall. One counselor was assigned to all the ESL students on campus. The teachers coordinated their curriculum, assisted each other in the presentation of materials, met regularly do discuss issues pertaining to their students, and called or visited the students' homes to praise behavior or advise parents of problems.

At the end of the first year of the freshman ESL core program, the administration chose a new ESL coordinator who did not support the freshman core approach and the program was dismantled. From then on English learners were placed in ESL or mainstream classes at the discretion of the ESL counselor, who also happened to be the new ESL coordinator. The ESL program consisted of the classes designated for English

learners in the different departments. The teachers of these classes did not formally meet together.

Population

The students for this study consisted of the 70 immigrants who were classified as Limited English Proficient as freshmen and placed in the freshman ESL core program in the school year of 1990-1991. Sixty-six of the students were from Mexico, three were from Guatemala, and one was from El Salvador. All but a few had resided in the U.S. for less than two years. Most of those who had been in the U.S. prior to the start of their freshman year had attended one of the local middle schools.

Methods

Qualitative data were collected on these students from the time they were placed in the high school's freshman ESL core program through their senior year. The students were observed both on and off campus, and formal and informal interviews were conducted with the students and staff over the course of four years. Case studies were conducted with six of the students to gain a more in-depth view of their lives.

FINDINGS

Language Choice and Ethnic Identity

"The Chicanos don't want to say they speak Spanish because people would think that they're Mexican or something and that would be a shameful thing."

The greatest social concern of the Latino immigrants appeared to be their low status, as group, in relationship to the other ethnic groups on campus. Particularly painful to these students was the typically hostile and demeaning treatment they received from the dominant group on campus, the Chicano students. Chicanos often went out of their way not to be identified with the *mejicanos*, and the immigrants quickly picked up the sense of shame associated with being a recent arrival for whom English was obviously a second language. Each group had their own gang and there were frequent altercations on and off campus.

The key identifier for distinguishing whether a Latino student was Chicano or *mejicano* was whether they chose to speak in English or Spanish in social situations. This made becoming fluent in English especially problematic for the immigrants. Although they recognized the importance of learning English, there was a negative stigma attached to becoming fluent in English and choosing to leave the ESL track to take mainstream classes. Students who did so were often ridiculed by their former classmates. A comment made about one of the few who became fluent in English was, "*Se crea mucho. Ya piensa que es una chicana.*" [She's really stuck up. She thinks she's a Chicana now.]

Conversely, while there was a social stigma against *mejicanos* speaking English, there was also a stigma against Chicanos speaking Spanish. There were several incidents of Chicanos who could speak Spanish but who would deny it to their peers and teachers.

Tracking

After observing the students for several years it became apparent that an informal "ESL track" was in place at the school. Of the twenty-five students still enrolled as seniors, only two were fully mainstreamed. Some students were partially mainstreamed, but the majority were taking all ESL classes. The preponderance of students in ESL classes can be attributed to several causes. The ESL program was not very effective and few students felt prepared to mainstream. But academic and English speaking abilities were not the only determinants of where students preferred to be placed. There were also very strong social influences keeping them from mainstreaming. Many students did not want to leave the ESL track because it was more comfortable there. To choose to mainstream was to choose to leave one's peers behind, and for these students who were already a small minority at the school, this was very intimidating. In fact, some students had mainstreamed and then returned to the ESL track not because they couldn't handle it academically, but because of their sense of isolation, embarrassment, and the ridicule they suffered from mainstream students.

There were, however, several negative consequences to staying in the ESL track for all four years. The students were socially segregated from the rest of the student population, which minimized the opportunities for the English learners to develop social relationships with the other students, or to strengthen their English skills through interactions with English dominant students. It also prevented their access to the academic track. College prep classes were not offered in Spanish. Furthermore, the material presented in the ESL classes was renown for being watered down.

Following are comments that students made the last months of their senior year concerning their experiences in mainstream classes:

> At times students make fun of me when I don't say the words correctly. In the beginning it hurt. But now I get in front of the class and I read and speak, and sometimes they laugh but I don't care.

> I'm in one regular class but I feel strange. I feel ashamed.

> I was mainstreamed but I came back to ESL. It's easier, but mainly I returned because everyone gave me a hard time in the regular classes. I'd rather be with my own kind.

> This year I had a regular class. I went a few times but there were gringos and everything and I didn't like it. Everybody just spoke English. My English isn't that good. Even though you learn more in the regular class, ESL is better because I have more fun.

> When I was in a regular class they looked at me funny. They made fun of me. I was embarrassed to talk.

There were bad people who made fun of me when I spoke and made me feel afraid and embarrassed.

I had a few regular classes and I felt really strange because there were a lot of Chicanos and Blacks and gringos all speaking English. And I'd have to talk to them and the teacher and I would think, "Ay! How do you say that word?" I felt a little strange but I would rather have been in more regular classes.

Despite the treatment that they received outside the ESL track, some students recognized advantages to being mainstreamed:

Since I was a freshman, I've been in the "stupid" (ESL) classes. They don't encourage you very much, so you don't learn as much as you could. They don't push you very much. I don't think they taught me very well. You can't learn English, it's all Mexicans in here.

I chose not to be in ESL classes because you don't learn as much. In the ESL classes you speak more Spanish and to tell you the truth I don't like it. I know Spanish already and I am trying to learn English.

I asked to have only one ESL class. I learn better English when I am forced to learn, such as in regular classes.

The truth for me is that one should have one and a half years of ESL, or two years maximum, then switch to regular classes. You learn more. You might know English but be afraid to speak it. But in regular classes you have to, and you don't have all the classmates that speak Spanish. You lose your fear of speaking and you get to know people who speak English. You begin to speak to them and you

try to be understood, and that is how you really learn. What helped me the most was being placed in regular classes to get over my embarrassment of speaking English. If I had stayed in ESL for four years, I'd be able to write English but not speak it. I learned a lot in ESL, but when I left class I was afraid to speak in English. When I first started regular classes I was afraid that others would make fun of me, but I would listen closely to how they say things and what it means, and then I'd know how to say it. I would have to talk out of necessity, and others would say that they understood me, then I knew that I knew it. If I made a mistake, they would tell me "You say it this way." But if I stayed in ESL, my fellow students couldn't help me like that. They were in the same boat I was.

The School Staff

The person selected to coordinate the ESL program after the students' freshman year was a counselor with no teaching experience. He never took classes toward ESL or bilingual education endorsement. And for the three years that he was the ESL coordinator, he never observed an ESL class. He also never brought the teachers of ESL classes together to coordinate their instruction or discuss issues concerning their English learners.

During the four years that this research took place, there was only one staff development meeting devoted to how to teach English learners. Teachers with ESL or bilingual education endorsements were not strongly recruited. Of the fourteen teachers of content classes, only two were ESL or bilingual education certified. Selection of who would teach an ESL content area class was determined within each department. If no one volunteered then they were selected by lowest seniority. There were several cases of teachers in their first year of teaching, with no special training, given classes for English learners. There were also incidents of teachers choosing to teach ESL classes to avoid being laid off.

The students' age rather than their educational level or English speaking ability was used to determine what class they would be placed in. Thus, a seventeen-year-old who had just arrived was placed in the same class with students who had been in the U.S. for four years.

Teachers' sensitivity to and respect for the students' native language and culture varied. Some were very supportive of the Latino immigrants and expressed high expectations for their students:

> There's no limit to what they can do. It depends on them.
>
> Their only limits are their mental attitude and their command of English. Whatever they want to attain, they can. And they'll attain more for being bilingual.
>
> They can go as high as they'll take it.

Other teachers expressed lower expectations and a lack of appreciation for the students' language and culture:

> Lupe should go to college someday, but she'll probably end up pregnant.
>
> These kids are smart, but they're lazy.
>
> These minority kids just come to school to party.
>
> These people are just here to take advantage of us. Their culture doesn't seem to value education very much and I don't think I should be held accountable for that.
>
> I'm hearing Spanish. I may have to take disciplinary action.

One teacher was observed as she attempted to emphasize the point with her students that they needed to forget their Spanish and start thinking in English. She pantomimed that the Spanish was trash that she knocked out of her head, rolled into a ball, dropped on the floor, and crushed into the ground like a cigarette butt.

Legal Status

The majority of the immigrant students in this study were undocumented, and so were their parents. Obtaining legal resident status under these circumstances was very difficult at the time this study was conducted. It required a minimum of seven years continuous residemce in the U.S. and meeting several criteria, afterwhich the individual must return to his or her own country to apply and then wait for a minimum of one year before being allowed to reenter. Since that time, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 was made law, which has made obtaining legal residency for undocumented youth virtually impossible (unless he or she marries a U.S. citizen).

The impact that undocumented status had on the students was profound. As freshmen they were asked what they wanted to be someday. They said doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants. Nobody mentioned wanting to do manual labor. But by their junior year, they had become very aware of the limitations placed on their futures. They could not qualify for college scholarships, and the high cost of tuition made attending college next to impossible. They also knew that with or without a high school diploma they would be denied meaningful employment opportunities. This realization appeared to strongly influence the decision of many students to leave school, or to quit applying themselves if they stayed. The title of this paper comes from one of the case study students. When she was about to graduate she was asked her about the plans for her future that she had expressed as a freshman. She said, "They aren't plans anymore, they were just dreams that I wanted to become reality." After she graduated she went to work in a sweatshop, sewing labels on baseball caps.

Following are comments other students made concerning how their status as undocumented immigrants affected their lives:

> I want to go to college but I have to wait three more years to apply for my papers. I would like to go to college, but if you don't have money they can't help you if you don't have a social security number. I would like to continue studying. I want to be a nurse. Without papers it is difficult. The only place you can get a job is in a factory.

> Not having papers affects me a lot. Last month they awarded me a scholarship worth $3000. But I couldn't accept it. It was a school in San Diego.

> I can't go on in school because of the expense. There are three of us at home and my mom supports us by cleaning houses. I was going to quit school altogether but my mom said to stay. I'd like to work with computers, work at a cash register or as a secretary. But without papers all I can be is a seamstress or clean houses.

> It affects your morale when you don't have papers. You can't do anything. Nothing at all. You can't work, you can't apply for financial aide, they all want a social security number. Someone comes with a lot of drive and they say this and you go to different places and they all say the same thing. I don't know, it really brings a person down.

Graduation Rate

Of the 70 students who began in the freshman ESL program, six transferred to other schools. Of the remaining 64 students: 37 dropped out; one was expelled; one committed suicide; and eight did not have enough credits to graduate after four years, nor

did they enroll the following year. Seventeen graduated in four years, giving a graduation rate of 27% for the 64 who did not transfer.

CONCLUSIONS

This study elucidated several issues relevant to the educational experiences of adolescent Latino immigrants.

Relations between *mejicanos* and Chicanos were often contentious. Several factors may help explain the presence of this animosity The newly arrived Mexicans typically were very poor in Mexico and were still very poor in the U.S. The majority did not have legal residency. Many did not receive a strong education in their homeland. And, of course, their ability to speak English was limited. These factors together made for a rather powerless group of people, held in low esteem by the larger society. The Chicano students may have been reflecting these sentiments. Moreover, the Chicanos were most likely to be associated with this group because of physical and cultural similarities and therefore had more at stake in attempting to distance themselves from the *mejicanos*. One student suggested it was because many of the Chicanos were only a generation or two removed from such circumstances themselves. The ESL counselor mentioned the resentment expressed by Chicanos towards the immigrants when they would see them getting free food or clothing or special field trips. Another Hispanic counselor said it was a result of the Chicano families' resentment of the Mexicans coming in and taking their jobs.

A related issue was that choosing to speak in Spanish or English served as a key identifier of which ethnic group an individual was associated with, and this adversely affected many of the immigrant students' progress in English. Perhaps this phenomenon can best be understood when one considers the importance to an individual of having a group identity, of relating to others whom you consider to be similar to yourself in significant ways. This desire can be particularly strong during adolescence. A unique situation occurs when Latino immigrants learn English. No matter how fluent they

become they are in little danger of being mistaken for an Anglo or an African American. But they could be mistaken for a Chicano. Latino immigrants could be considered to be members of a group for which they may hold strong feelings of animosity and resentment. To be mislabeled as such could pose a grave threat to their group and self-identity. Maintaining distinct characteristics, such as language use, held inordinate significance.

This study also revealed that the students' track placement was not solely a factor of their academic progress, nor even of society's or a school staff's expectations for a certain ethnic group, but rather, peer social factors had a large influence on where they were placed. Students requested to remain in the ESL track for reasons of social comfort. Furthermore, if students chose to leave their track despite the social discomfort, there were extensive social consequences.

The education of the English learners did not appear to be a priority for the administration at this school; perhaps because they represented only six percent of the student population, or perhaps because their families were not powerful or vocal members of the community. The administration did not actively recruit qualifed ESL or bilingual teachers, nor did it make a concerted attempt to educate the school staff concerning optimal teaching techniques for English learners. Teachers expressed attitudes toward the immigrants that ranged from fully supportive and dedicated to their success to thinly-veiled racism.

It was evident that the students' legal status had a significant influence on their school experience. Their motivation to stay in school and excel academically decreased as their awareness of the limitations imposed upon them by federal law increased. The negative impact of this awareness voiced by the students is reflected in 1990 U.S. census data which indicated that 51% of all the Latino dropouts were non-U.S. citizens. Non-U.S born Latinos who were granted U.S. citizenship or legal residency accounted for only 7.7% of the Latino dropouts (U.S. GAO Report, 1994).

One-fourth to one-third of all recent immigrants to this country are undocumented (Fix and Passel, 1994). And yet the issue of immigrant students' legal status rarely surfaces in discussions concerning their educational needs and academic achievement. Most literature on the education of English learners gives the impression that the only impediments to an immigrant student's high school graduation, college education, and a successful career are a weak ESL program and insufficient guidance counseling. A more holistic view of these students' lives is in order.

The appallingly low graduation rate of 27% for this cohort of Latino immigrants can be attributed in large part to the following factors: a poorly designed and poorly implemented ESL program; tensions between ethnic groups that created a hostile learning environment; and a national immigration policy that undercuts the motivation of these students to apply themselves academically.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations can be made based upon the findings of this study.

Recommendations for ESL Programs

Commitment. As prior research has indicated, ESL programs are not successful unless there is a school-wide commitment to the education of English learners. The recommendations offered would be ineffectual if they were not fully supported by the school's principal, other administrators, and the teaching staff. Inherent in this commitment is the belief in the ability of these students to succeed, and respect for their language and culture.

The Core concept. The Core concept could be a valuable part of an ESL program, particularly in districts where there are not enough immigrant students to merit a separate newcomer school. The ESL Core program would focus intensely on English skills, offer bilingual instruction, when possible, or sheltered instruction in the content areas. The curriculum would include information about U.S. culture and its educational system, such as the significance of grades, course credits, and college entrance exams. The Core

teachers could collaborate to synthesize their instruction and discuss issues relating to their students. Students would stay in this ESL Core for a maximum of two to three years.

Mainstreaming. The most thorough studies concerning the education of children in U.S. schools with limited skills in English confirm the effectiveness of several years of bilingual instruction in the elementary school years. The need to be presented the foundations of formal learning in the most comprehensible fashion possible should be common sense. Furthermore, there are issues of the development of self-identity in these formative years and the inseparable relationship between one's language and one's identity. Negating and devaluing a child's home language can precipitate a myriad of unanticipated problems.

The adolescent immigrants who enter our secondary schools, however, differ from young children in significant ways. They already have an educational foundation, albeit in another language. Learning English, in large part, is a matter of learning new labels for concepts that they are already familiar with. Their self-identity is already formed; they typically identify strongly with their country of origin and its language. Adolescent immigrants face time constraints that younger children do not. If they are to receive the benefits of being mainstreamed, it must be done relatively quickly.

For these reasons we recommend that students be encouraged to enter the regular classroom once a strong foundation in English skills and content area knowledge has been developed in an ESL Core. This would have several advantages: immigrant students could interact and develop relationships with English-dominant students, which would improve their English skills as well as perhaps reduce their ethnic group's isolation on campus. They would have access to the more academic curriculum. By having mainstreaming be the norm, there would be many more immigrant students in any given classroom, thus they would feel less isolated and would perhaps be less of a target for ridicule by other students. A further advantage of this method is that a school could

concentrate its (typically) limited number of teachers with bilingual or ESL endorsements on the students first couple of years, when they need the most special assistance.

There would be those students, perhaps ones with a limited education in their homeland in particular, who would not be ready to mainstream after two years. Some upper division sheltered content classes would be required to meet their needs. But for the majority of the students, knowing that they would be mainstreamed after two or three years would provide strong motivation to become fluent in English.

Recommendations for Teachers. For large numbers of students to successfully mainstream into the regular classroom, *all* teachers would need to be trained in how to adapt their instruction to make it more comprehensible. It is also crucial that mainstream teachers demonstrate respect for the immigrant students and their language. Ridicule of English learners by English dominant students could not be tolerated.

Teachers should also be made aware of some of the socio-cultural aspects of learning a second language: why some immigrants may resist becoming fluent in English because of the fear that it may alter their group and self-identity. We concur with Pérez' (1984) recommendation that teachers stress learning English because of its usefulness in functioning in the U.S. and obtaining better employment, not to become "more American." We would even recommend initiating discussion as to the positive and negative aspects of becoming fluent in English, as well as emphasizing to the students that they don't have to give up their native language and identity just because they use English when it is practical and beneficial to do so.

Recommendations Concerning Legal Status

One has to question the logic of the current situation concerning undocumented youth in this country, where state and federal governments spend thousands of dollars per student each year, only to disallow them to participate in and contribute to our society except surreptitiously in positions of menial labor. Undocumented students are taught English and the academic knowledge that is considered important enough to be required

to graduate from high school, and then are denied the means to further their education or to obtain meaningful employment.

We recommend that current policy be modified to allow undocumented students who have lived in United States long enough to attend and graduate from U.S. high schools be eligible for college scholarships, and that they be permitted to seek and obtain meaningful employment while waiting to qualify for legal residence. Until such changes are made, no matter how much improvement is made in the educational programs for English learners are improved, there will continue to be high drop out rates for Latino immigrants.

Recommendations for Further Research

There were several issues that emerged in this study that call for further investigation:

The ESL Program. Continued research is needed concerning how to best teach both English and content material to English learners within the structure and time frames of the public high school. Two characteristics of some immigrant students were not discussed in this paper but are serious issues for the schools that attempt to teach them and merit further research: first, those students that have a very limited education in their home country; and secondly, those students that come to the high school at the age of seventeen or older, who rarely stay to complete four years. U.S. high schools are not designed to teach even native speakers of English that have not completed elementary school, or to teach anyone beginning high school beyond their early teens. Alternative school structures that can promote success for these special populations needs to be investigated.

Tracking. The students' influence on their own track placement for reasons of social comfort should be investigated with other populations of students besides immigrants. It has been noted in research on tracking that once students are placed in a certain track, they typically stay in that track for the duration of their school experience.

It is quite possible that the students' lack of mobility can be attributed in part to their desire to stay with the peers with whom they have bonded over time, and/or to avoid conflict with other groups.

Language and Identity. Continued research is needed on ways to present English instruction in a fashion that minimizes resistance to learning English because it is identified with another ethnic group.

Legal Status. The limitations placed on undocumented students by federal laws has many negative consequences. Although the topic is polemic, further research and dialogue are needed to improve current policies.

We hope that these findings and recommendations prove useful to those involved in the education of adolescent Latino immigrants in the United States. The consistent neglect of their educational needs and the legal restraints placed upon those who are undocumented has precipitated a tragic loss of human potential for these individuals and our country as a whole.

"We need to be treated as if what we did was important."

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